CONSUMING "EUROPEAN": CAPTURING CONSUMER CULTURE OF FIVE EUROPEAN COUNTRIES

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Abstract

The European Union has been an important part of every-day life for European consumers and companies actively encourage cross-national consumption experiences by developing and implementing Pan-European marketing strategies. However, the theoretical underpinnings for the cultural dynamics within the EU remain sketchy and largely unexplored. This paper aims to understand how consumers balance the "new" realities within the European Union and their influence on consumption behaviour. Consumer culture theory, ethnic identity and acculturation theory are applied to the multi-faceted EU context and particularly the effects on consumption behaviour. Focus groups with consumers in Austria, Denmark (i.e., countries with longer EU-membership), Slovenia, Poland and Czech Republic (i.e., countries with short membership status) provide empirical insights to our theoretical contentions. Results for different product categories are discussed by means of emerging stories from focus group discussions.

Keywords (5-6)

CONSUMING "EUROPEAN": CAPTURING CONSUMER CULTURE OF FIVE EUROPEAN COUNTRIES

Culture holds the "broadest, deepest and most enduring influences on consumer behaviour" (Cleveland & Laroche, 2007, p. 249)

Introduction

For many years, the European Union has been a part of every-day life for Europeans, not only in their role as citizens, but also as consumers. The vast variety of products and services available from other (European) countries, the Europe-wide availability of similar media channels or the opportunities to travel freely in a region of 27 member countries have exposed consumers to lifestyles and products that go beyond their national experiences (Malhotra, Agarwal, & Baalbaki, 1998; Paliwoda & Marinova, 2007; Sciglimpaglia & Saghafi, 2004). Moreover, companies actively seek to support these cross-national consumption experiences by developing and implementing Pan-European marketing strategies (Aistrich, Saghafi, & Sciglimpaglia, 2006; Halliburton & Hunerberg, 1993). While these developments can be clearly observed in the marketplace, the theoretical underpinnings for the cultural dynamics within the EU, particularly their specific effects on consumption behaviour and thus systematic exploitation in marketing strategies remain sketchy and largely unexplored (e.g. Halliburton & Hunerberg, 2004).

From a theoretical angle, consumer culture theory provides a starting point. Consumer culture "frames consumers' horizons of conceivable action, feeling and thought, making certain patterns of behaviour and sense-making interpretations more likely than others" (Arnould & Thompson, 2005; in Merz, He, & Alden, 2008). Consumer culture theory suggests "that consumption is a historically shaped mode of socio-cultural practice that emerges within the structures and ideological imperatives of dynamic marketplaces" (Arnould & Thompson, 2005, p.875). This all-embracing approach serves well to theoretically capture the dynamics of 27 national/cultural and even more sub-cultural contexts within the EU.

Building on the knowledge of consumer culture theory, on ethnic identity and consumer acculturation research (e.g. Cleveland & Laroche, 2007; Davies & Fitchett, 2004; Ogden, Ogden, & Jensen Schau, 2004), this paper aims to help understand how consumers balance the "new" realities within the European Union and their influence on consumption behaviour. While the effects of ethnic identity and the acculturation process were usually investigated in a bi-polar situation (home – host country/global culture), we want to evaluate their usefulness

in the more multi-faceted EU context where consumers juggle ethnic identity and acculturation to more than one culture, but in many cases less permanently (than in the case of migration) through extended stays of study or work abroad, for example. Focus groups with consumers in Austria, Denmark (i.e., countries with longer EU-membership), Slovenia, Poland and Czech Republic (i.e., countries with short membership status) provide empirical insights to our theoretical contentions. Results for different product categories are discussed by means of emerging stories from focus group discussions.

Conceptual Background

International marketers have set high hopes in the Common Market. Trade liberalization and the formation of a single market affect consumption patterns, push cultural convergence, and subsequently provide ground for standardized marketing activities across EU markets (Malhotra et al., 1998; Manrai & Manrai, 1995). For pan-European marketing activities to become reality, cultural convergence manifested in similar consumer needs, preferences and buying patterns is a prerequisite (Ganesh, 1998).

Consumer culture theory provides a theoretical framework how consumers deal with concurrent global and local cultural influences on their lives. Along the continuum of globalization vs. localization, researchers have advocated either for the emergence of global consumer cultures with increasing homogenization of consumption patterns (Alden, Steenkamp, & Batra, 1999), while others observe the persistence of local consumption patterns towards globalization (e.g. Jackson, 2004). As Merz et al. (2008) note in their article, real-life examples can be put forward supporting either position on the continuum. For a more substantiated approach to analyze whether global or local consumer cultures evolve, they suggest to use categorization theory. For our work, we capitalize on their insights and use the degree of similarity in categorizing of consumption situations/product choices across cultures as indicators for a homogenization vs. heterogenization in consumer cultures. Merz et al. (2008) argue that homogenization (globalization) of consumer culture takes place, when categorizations of consumptions situations/product choices are shared by consumers across cultures, while heterogenization (localization) persists, when categorizations differ across cultures. This equally pertains to symbolic and utilitarian meanings of consumption situations/product choices.

While consumer culture theory and the proposed categorization of consumption situations/product choices contribute greatly to a better understanding of consumer cultures in the EU, it is important to also see how this process takes place. Delineating the procedural

aspect will not only deepen the understanding, but also contribute to evaluate the extent to which cultural changes have affected consumer behaviour within the EU. To capture the dynamic aspect of how consumer cultures within the EU develop, research on ethnic identity, situational identity and consumer acculturation (e.g. Cleveland & Laroche, 2007; Davies & Fitchett, 2004; Ogden et al., 2004) provide a helpful input for our work.

The concept of (ethnic) identity[1] is a key component when explaining the impact of culture on individuals, as it is said to be the psychological locus of cultural effects (Markus & Kitayama, 1991). Historically, ethnic identity was seen mainly as a demographic characteristic (e.g., respondents' country of origin). This notion has changed now to an expression of an individual's attachment to a certain cultural group which is supported by consumers through the choice of relevant products/market offerings (Arnould & Thompson, 2005).

Ethnicity is understood as a psychological state whose effect on consumption behaviour varies situationally (Stayman & Deshpande, 1989). It is argued that the social situation has a key influence on the salience of ethnicity which "is likely to increase or decrease depending on the extent to which one' ethnicity is similar to or different from that of others in a given environment or situation" (Stayman & Deshpande, 1989, p. 362). In our context, being in a social interaction with "dedicated Europeans" or "proud nationals" will affect the salience of a European or national identity and thus influence consumption behaviour differently.

Acculturation theory helps to understand how a "new" cultural environment is reflected in consumer behaviour (Davies & Fitchett, 2004). In situations, where the own ethnic identity differs from the mainstream culture and individuals are *changing* cultural contexts" (Segall, Dasen, Berry, & Poortinga, 1990, p. 291, italics), consumers develop strategies how to align the two different cultures. In acculturation research, traditionally, immigrants' cultural adaptation to the host culture is captured (e.g. Dato-on, 2000).Thus, acculturation is usually conceptualized as a phenomenon that spans two nations (Penaloza, 1994). Factors that contribute to acculturation can be intercultural contact, but also diffusion of ideas or artefacts across cultures, i.e. for instance technologies or institutions spreading from one culture to another (Segall et al., 1990). Acculturation in this context is understood as the socialization process in which consumers change and/or acquire skills, behaviours, knowledge, attitudes and values of a culture that are different from those of their culture of origin (Cleveland & Laroche, 2007; Dato-on, 2000; Ogden et al., 2004).

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[1] While we do acknowledge the fact that there is ongoing discussion about the concept of ethnic identity and its interchangeable use with cultural identity (see f.ex. Cui, Choo, & Koh, 2006), we did not see a need to deepen this issue here further and rather rely on the well established concept of ethnic identity.

In the context of the European Union/Europe, many of the theoretical contentions outlined above are directly applicable to explain Europeans' changing cultural contexts in the regions. Some specificities of the EU environment, however, go beyond the context that these theoretical approaches were developed for or tested in.

The specific environment of the EU entails that the cultural influences consumers are exposed to are not solely chosen by the consumers nor are consumers prepared to acculturate as opposed to emigrants who often choose to set up new lives in other countries (Segall et al., 1990). In many cases, consumers do not completely change their cultural context (compared to emigration), but are exposed to many different national cultures often on a short-term basis. Exposure takes place through travel, a big variety of – (host country) local and (EU-wide) non-local - products, national and pan-European - advertising activities, through contacts to individuals – directly or media-mediated - from other cultural contexts, but also in more medium-term ways (e.g., temporal change of location through professional occupation, studies, etc. within the EU)(Cleveland & Laroche, 2007, p. 250). Andreasen (1990) refers to these developments as "cultural interpenetration". The short- and medium-term cultural interpenetration causes complexity in markets and "radical changes" in consumer behaviour (Douglas & Craig, 1997; Luna & Gupta, 2001, p. 62) which in turn can – again - lead to cultural change (Gaudet, Clément, & Deuzeman, 2005). Reactions to the cultural change include avoiding cultural contact, or embracing new cultural aspects, or selectively choosing some aspects and/or merging new with old ones (Segall et al., 1990).

In the following, we will outline where the selected theoretical frameworks apply and where we seek to contribute further insights into their applicability to different contexts.

One dimension of our contribution is to use consumer culture theory as the basic grounds for our investigation. By exploring similarities and differences across cultures of how consumers categorize symbolic and utilitarian meanings of consumption situations/product choices, we will develop a better understanding of consumer cultures within the complexity of EU consumer realities. We will be able to shed more systematically light on whether a "European consumer culture" (compared to global or local consumer cultures) is emerging.

Second, for the reasons outlined in previous sections, we believe that ethnic identity and situational ethnicity contribute strongly to explain how European consumers manage their consumption experiences within the EU. The cultural interpenetration outlined before implies that consumers do not completely change their cultural context, i.e., abandon their own ethnic/national identity, but deal with a superordinate identity dimension, i.e. "being

European". A newly developing EU identity does not offset national sentiments, but coexists with other identities (Kritzinger, 2005). We will shed more light on how European consumers balance multiple identities, how they align their ethnic/national identity with the new "European" identity, how they alter their consumption patterns and to what extent "Europeanness" in consumer cultures within the EU emerges.

Third, acculturation research helps to unravel the potential development of a European consumer culture. By looking at the process of adapting to cultural change (cf. Segall et al., 1990), we will gain further insights into the dynamics of consumer cultures within the EU. We follow Allport (1969) who stated that the main criteria of nationality are psychological, and that certain traditions, historical perspectives, and principles which are shared by the different members of national groups are the basis of their nationality. Thus, one belongs to a nation who not only shares these ideas with the others of the group but is also loyal to them. In this respect, acculturation is linked to ethnic and cultural identity (Chattalas & Harper, 2007; Lu, 2001; Pons, Laroche, Nyeck, & Perreault, 2001). Contrary to classical acculturation research which starts from a bi-polar notion (acculturation from home to global/host-culture), we aim to extend the explanatory power to the EU setting, where acculturation is more multi-faceted (multiple countries), but usually less permanent (short- to medium-term exposure to foreign cultures) as outlined above.

Methodology

In order to elucidate how Europeans balance their consumption experiences and patterns within EU realities and to explore whether a European consumer culture is emerging, a qualitative research design was used. This seemed appropriate given the specific background and cultural dynamics in the EU.

Country Choice

In this context, the question had to be answered which level of aggregation of a culture should be used. Past research in this context suggested that nation-states as units of analysis would be appropriate (Hofstede, 1991; Kale, 1995). Also, it appeared useful to select countries which have been members of the EU for a longer period of time and which differ in size and geographic location within the EU, and countries which are rather new members or just about to enter the EU. Based on literature review and political events, such as the accession of countries to the EU, we chose three countries that are new members to the EU, namely Slovenia, Poland and the Czech Republic. As for the selection of already established EU-

member countries, we decided to use Austria and Denmark. Both are small open economies and EU-member for some time. While both countries share much communality in terms of their relationship to the European Union, Denmark – in contrast to Austria - opted out of introducing the common EU currency, the Euro, twice (1992, 2000) after considerable public debate.

Product choice

As mentioned previously the categorization of consumption situations/product choices into symbolic and utilitarian and a shared or divergent interpretation across cultures shapes the extent of globalization or localization of consumer cultures (Merz et al., 2008). Within consumer culture theory, goods are seen as communicators and thus their symbolic value is important. Individuals transitioning into new cultures are motivated to achieve social acceptance and want to understand behavioural expectations. This can be accomplished by consumption, in particular via symbolic consumption and the use of products to support the self-image (Dato-on, 2000).

To understand a consumer culture, "the availability of an extensive range of commodities, goods and experiences which are to be consumed, maintained, planned and dreamt about" (Featherstone, 1991, p. 114) is relevant; consumption thus is not just the consumption of utilities (Featherstone, 1991). Here, we follow the classification of products into symbolic and functional product (e.g. Ogden et al., 2004). The distinction into "think, utilitarian" and "feel, symbolic" products is based on the idea that different levels of involvement and information processing takes place with respect to products.

While feel or symbolic products are bought because of ego gratification, social acceptance, and sensory stimulation think or utilitarian products are bought for their functional performance and evaluated cognitively. Thus, while symbolic aspects contribute to the enhancement of the self, utilitarian aspects contribute to functional performance (Chaudhuri & Holbrook, 2002; Claeys, Swinnen, & Vanden Abeele, 1995).

So far, studies on cross-cultural consumption primarily used symbolic products to determine the degree of acculturation of a particular cultural / ethnic group (e.g. Ogden et al., 2004) which disregards reality of most cultural groups. For analysing the development of European consumer culture we consider both product categories in our research design and thus avoid a-priori exclusion of one of the categories.

Field work

In total, 25 focus-group discussions were run in five European countries (Poland, Czech Republic, Slovenia, Denmark, and Austria). The basis for the formation of the focus groups, each with five to eight participants was education (with or without graduation) and age (below and above 30 years old). The rationale behind these delimiters draws on previous research that point towards younger and more educated people who are more receptive to pan-European marketing initiatives (e.g., Guido, 1991).

A discussion guideline was developed by the researcher team and research assistants were trained to run and observe the discussions. The guideline included questions regarding general views on Europe and the EU in order to identify the existing value system of the participants. More specific questions were on respondents' consumption patterns and their motivations to buy national, regional (European) or global brands and products.

Group discussions were tape-recorded and transcripts were available in the original language and summaries in English were produced by the discussion moderators. The coding scheme was developed by the research team and successively adapted while analyzing the texts. The coding strategy followed Strauss and Glaser's (1994; 1998) recommendations, i.e. open, selective and axial coding.[2]

Results

Emerging themes were categorized in the form of stories to illustrate the various consumer cultures. Stories are a well suited to illustrate or challenge theories and reflect the "flowing value" of events very well (Bolton et al., 2004; Hopkinson & Hogg, 2006; Vargo & Lusch, 2004). In our case two types of stories were produced: first, focus group participants narrated consumption situations followed by discussions. Second, from different focus groups we collected common themes and put them together. We used deductive categories for the analysis of data, mainly derived from literature: symbolic and utilitarian product levels and the distinction into two levels of cultures: heterogeneous and homogenous. Based on this categorisation we identified four different goods (cars, food, airbus, washing machine) on which the stories unfolded (see Figures 1 and 2).

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[2] We used computer software, NVivo 8 for building up the data corpus. The corpus included focus group discussion transcripts as well as summaries and observations of the moderators. Throughout the coding and analysis processes memos were created by the researchers which contained the emerging themes and ideas but also documented the changes of the node system.

Insert Figure 1 here (or later)

Insert Figure 2 here (or later)

To start with, there seems to be no major influence of age or education on participants' perceptions and preferences. Small differences pertain to the way opinions are expressed and the general level of discussion: participants who are below 30 (abbreviation in the subsequent section: "<30") and with lower education ("no grad") express more everyday opinions and refer to more concrete examples when talking than participants with graduation ("grad") and those above 30 (">30"). Since this is not very strong but an observation of the communication style in the following participants were analyzed together.

Stories capturing symbolic products at two cultural levels

Focus group participants talked easily about symbolic products, such as cars, food or clothing. In order to explore the respective consumer cultures more closely, we choose the discussion about cars as illustration of homogenous cultures and food as illustration of heterogeneous cultures. Both narratives are around the theme "European Workmanship"; in the case of cars, technological virtue and quality is the central aspect, while for food, its production, sustainability and modified food were central discussion elements.

Cars as a symbol for a homogenization in European consumer culture

Throughout the discussions participants seemed to have a similar idea of what European cars are, what they mean and what distinguishes them from non-European or national products. In addition, the statements and stories about cars resemble each other across focus groups. When talking about cars, participants quickly turned to brand names and also found rational arguments (quality and prestige) why European cars would be superior to for example U.S. or Japanese cars. This points to a pan-European perception related to cars and the expression of a more homogenous cultural context.

The following discussion is taken from Austrian focus groups and serves as main story to illustrate the way in which a symbolic product category reflects homogenization in European consumer culture. The elements forming the culture are perceptions of quality linked to trust, to European workmanship, to ethically correct production standards, but also to the question who can afford it. In other words, European quality is high and the price for it is high too, but the result is bigger trust. Particularly with symbolic consumer durables, it turned out clearly across focus groups that "owning" products is very important to be part of consumer culture.

Moreover, participants expressed that it had to be the "right" products. This supports the previously established link between materialism and homogenous consumer cultures (Cleveland & Laroche, 2007).

> Question: Are European products better?
> Lukas: Regarding cars, those which are produced in Europe, they are of good quality, meaning that there is trust, more compared to when I see it comes from Korea.... I know Korea from the map... I would have fears. I'd say I would prefer European cars.

> Question: At which product categories would you prefer European products?
> Mark: Perhaps with cars? I think that one has a bit, me at least, I have more trust... It is probably not that they are *[non-European cars]* technically not good, it is simply trust out of habit, that I say okay; even if it is produced somewhere else. In fact, a car that I buy as Austrian car in Austria is compiled somewhere else. (A, >30, no grad)

> Karin: Cars, right?
> Martin: Cars soonest ... *(someone: chauvinistic thinking....)*
> Regina: One has to decide in general, do I decide on the basis of price or quality? What do I associate with it? Because only because it is from Japan, does not mean it is bad... Japanese cars have less shop's hourly rates than German cars.
> Karin: I would like to support the European ... the European economy...
> Martin: But only with cars? (A, <30, no grad)

> Question: At which product categories would you prefer European products?
> Richard: Car; I probably would only buy a European product although because of the costs I don't drive a European car. One has to comply with the available money; if I can afford it I would buy a European product, because it means higher quality and ethically correct production; the value of the product and the costs are right and the money remains in Europe. It was crazy the past few years, when the Euro was not at the money market but at the capital market, when the Americans tried to suppress the Euro *[starts to grumble about Americans]* (A, >30, grad)

These extracts from the Austrian focus groups show that in consumers' perception, cars have become comparable in terms of price and quality, but at the same time they are highly distinguishable because of their "Europeanness". This "Europeanness" reflects distinct issues such as fair working conditions or the fact that the European economy is supported.

From the other focus groups, similar statements were obtained:

> "A: To me, European products are of better quality, such as cars.
> B: I agree, Mercedes, BMW, Audi, Volkswagen are really great cars." (Pl, <30, no grad)

> "I would only buy an European car at the moment; European cars are famous for their high quality (Slo, >30, no grad)"

"I trust more a car from Europe than a car from Japan or China. But I don't think… Maybe the difference is not so big anymore. Because the companies who are left in the car business are also big. They have quality. If they can't deliver then it's bad for business. I think 10 years ago it was different. The market was small. But now, European cars… . " (Dk, >30, grad)

At the same time, cars and their high symbolic value are well-suited means to support the balance of ethnic identity vs. European identity. Results showed that participants from the new EU member countries tend to be more enthusiastic about European car brands but at the same time proud of their national brands. While they do share the generally positive perceptions of EU car brands, they stress the fact that their national brand (referring back to their ethnic identity) is to be put in the same line next to other European brands. Some respondents from the Czech Republic (the only country represented in the focus groups with a "national" car brand) put it as follows:

B: We also have good quality car: Skoda." (CZ, <30, no grad)

"It makes me feel proud when I am abroad and see Skoda alongside other brands like Peugeot and Ford. I say to myself they are aware of our products." (CZ, >30, no grad)

Another interesting stream of discussion evolved, when the focus was put on the specific country of origin. While in the previous – more general discussion – on cars, "being European" was a strong asset in consumer motives to buy European cars, a more differentiated picture emerged in the following discourses:

Silvia: Sometimes it says the product was made in the EU, but it is totally unclear from which country it actually comes from.
Lukas: For example cars, a Mercedes or a BMW, ok that's clear where they come from.
Tobias: Prices are different; here a Mercedes is much more expensive than in Germany.
Florian: Europe is a community, it is not a standardized thing, when I hear Italian car, then I think, well, good design. When I hear Scandinavian car, if I lived in the highlands, I would buy a Pinto and snow… that they can specialize. But the Europeans haven't shown such a qualification. (A, <30, no grad)

"Also it is hard to define, what Czech is. Our car producer Skoda is German today. A part of a product is produced here, another there. We also have Japanese or Korean factories and the workers are Czechs, so they will be selling a Japanese product that was produced with Czech hands." (CZ, >30, no grad)

"Having some experience with products from a company… I look at the company, and not where the product was produced. If it were a Mercedes, but produced in France, if it looked exactly the same, then it would not interest me if it were a French product but only that it is a Mercedes." (Pl, <30, grad)

Rosa: For example with a car. I look at what is being done in Italy and Germany. It is obvious that I rather take German than an Italian or Polish car, but financially there are big differences. So I cannot even think about it. (Dk, >30, no grad)

Julia: Many car manufacturers in Europe, which claim to be European, have components coming from Asia or all over the world. Is that still European then or is it not European? That's another question I guess. (DK, >30, grad)

"One thing, e.g. with cars is the place, where it is produced, another where it is designed. A car designed in Portugal will not have the same quality as a car designed in Germany. A product is not only defined by the place of production, but also by a place of design. Europe is missing to dominantly place itself with a product or an achievement." (Cz, >30, grad)

When considering the specific country of origin, consumers display awareness that the supply of automotive parts or manufacturing facilities have become issues of globalization. So sometimes, their statements aim at reconciling opposing positions: the favorable aspect of a car being perceived "European" vs. actually being manufactured at locations outside the EU. In that case, customers stress the fact that key processes such as design and technical development are done within the EU. Overall, the "Europeanness" in consumer behavior seems highly important in a symbolic product category such as cars. Respondents perceive the overarching theme of "European" as more important than the actual manufacturing location. "European" car brands evoke a feeling of shared consumer experience and choice "for a good cause".

Food as a symbolic product fostering heterogenization in European consumer culture

International manufacturers of food products (like dairy products, chocolate confectionary, etc) were among the first ones to explore pan-European marketing activities and selling their products in many markets (Browning, 1992; Strugatch, 1993). A look into supermarket shelves demonstrates the wide variety and availability of international products. Nevertheless, food turned out as a product category where consumers from the focus groups predominantly buy domestically, clearly pointing to heterogenization rather than homogenization in consumer culture. Particularly within the Polish sample, the decision in favor of local food products was very outspoken.

Kamila: In my opinion, Polish products (food) are of much better quality.
Gloria: You can't generalize, I think… But when it comes to food, then I think, Polish food is better.

Claudia: Food is definitely better. In Germany, for example, potatoes are very bad and unappetizing.
Gloria: Apples from Germany… I don't have good memories of German food. (Pl, >30, no grad)

Tomasz: Polish food has always been recognized in the West. (Pl, >30, grad)

Karel: I eat what I like. I do not check, whether a product is from the EU, or from Poland, it is more about the producing companies. If it is a company, that produces good food, then they usually produce in Poland. They don't have to import the food with trucks where they usually get bad. .
Joanna: I personally think that polish food is very good, but when I go shopping I don't check where the product is from; I simply buy what I can afford. But when it comes to polish food, they are very good and are valued and bought not only by Polish people. We export certain things.

Jan: When it comes to food, I do not have any doubts that I would buy polish food. My father was once in the Netherlands, he was very young then, and they picked apples or so...and he wanted to take an apple with him. Then the owner said he better bought an apple from a sales booth, because the ones they are picking are toxic. It is also said that there one hardly can find lizards because the soil is contaminated.
Jakub: Food... I don't know, they say that our food is healthier, but Europeans do not die from their food either. There, everything is more mechanical and they produce more.
Natalia: But it is about taste!
Jakub: But European products taste as well, don't they?
Julia: You know… they don't die at the moment, but all the modified food…
Julia: But the fact, that Europeans are so keen on our food means that our food is much better.
Jan: They are simply much more natural. (Pl, <30, grad)

In summary, domestic products were said to have much better quality, be fresher, as they had not travelled across the EU and more reliable in terms of ingredients (not genetically manipulated etc.). The stories developed about products from other EU countries are highly negative and resemble more probably more myths than reality in their bad connotations. The negative stereotyping has interesting effects: while Polish respondents praise the good food quality documented in the high number of experts, Austrian respondents perceive the same products as inferior quality flooding the home market. The perception of quality in the product category appears to be highly subjective and expressing a strong national identity, as the following statements demonstrate.

Jana: I try to buy Czech food. Especially with vegetables I usually look at the country of origin, mostly Czech and surrounding countries.
Flora: I buy Czech products on purpose, e.g. I buy Czech milk products. Germans buy their own products and protect their own market this way." (Cz, >30, grad)

> "I prefer domestic vegetables because I can imagine that an apple which is imported is awful. It was collected unripe and traveled four weeks trough Europe. I'd prefer an apple that comes from Burgenland (i.e. a region in Austria)." (A, <30, grad)

Some respondents prefer food from local or national production because they trust more in the producers, and explicitly reject products from other European countries, such as Czech production of eggs or Dutch tomatoes. They would choose a foreign, imported product only if food products are considered as totally inappropriate being produced in Europe.

> "I would not buy European bananas, because I know that they would be grown in greenhouses; to my knowledge they do not grow bananas in Europe. Or pineapples: I would not buy European pineapples." (A, <30, no grad)

The choice of domestic products clearly stresses the superiority of the own over other (food) cultures. When it comes to specific brands, consumer proudly mentioned national brands such as *Carlsberg* (beer, Danish Focus groups), *Radenska* (mineralwater, Slovenian focus groups), and cheese from *Bohinj* (Slovenian focus groups). However, even in within food which evokes strong feeling of national identity, a common European product was established when consumers started to compare bread from different countries:

> Richard: A typical European product is bread that is a typical Austrian product. Such bread does not exist in America.
> Daniel: Nor in Asia; they don't eat bread in Asia, they say it is acid and hard.
> Michaela: that's more Northern European, the dark bread; in Italy or Spain it does not exist.
> Richard: Bread as they have it in Italy, does not exist in America either. In South-America they have another bread, good bread, they make it of corn. In Asia there is no bread? Do they only eat rice??
> Daniel: Lot's of white flour, but not so much out of rye. (A,>30, grad)

> "Bread. If we think about what is it that we have in many European countries that they don't have in other countries. I think bread is one of the things that you don't have so much in other places. I think we are really regional." (Dk, >30, grad)

Overall, consumers actively notice and value the broader assortment of products and country-specific specialties (like French cheese, Austrian chocolates etc.) which now are more widely available from other EU-member countries. Unlike in previous discussions, a "Pro-European" spirit emerges, when discussions shift to a more general level.

> Barbara: The best wines from Italy and France. And I like bio food especially from "Demeter". It's of best quality.
> (Slo, >30, grad)

Relating these findings to acculturation strategies, it turns out that acculturation strategies that EU consumers utilize predominantly would be choosing some aspects of the new cultures, while keeping some of their "old" habits:

> Maja: But I do feel European, but of course maybe if you say out of 100% I am 90% Dane and 10% European or something like that.
> Maybe when they have been in the EU for ten years we will be eating more Estonian, Latvian food.
> Karen: But I think you are quite right that you have to meet someone from the specific country telling you about their sort of specific food. When you try to get more curious then it might develop. (DK, >30, grad)

Stories capturing utilitarian products at two cultural levels

Utilitarian products are brought up in the discussions, but as reflected in acculturation literature (e.g., Cleveland & Laroche, 2007), these products seem to be of lesser importance. In order to see, if and how utilitarian product categories add to European consumer culture, two product categories are selected and discussed in the following. However, there is still a symbolic aspect linked to most of the discussed examples. We used the discussion of the Airbus as utilitarian product example at the homogenous culture level and several examples from a national brand as representatives for heterogeneous consumer cultures (see Figure 2).

Airbus as symbol for homogenization in European consumer cultures

One important result from the discourses on utilitarian product categories is that "Europeanness" means "working together". Products that consist of different parts, all from Europe, or something that is done in "co-production" are perceived as European. This has been touched already in the car stories, but with "think" products the production mode reflects the European idea and its link to something "big". In this way, Europeanness comes out if several European countries are involved. This can take many forms, such as the assembly of "a big item" or the more philosophical ideal of working together which transcends national borders and possible inter-cultural conflicts, as the following discussion from the Danish focus groups is illustrating.

> Clara: What would be a typical European product then?
> Magnus: Airbus for example.
> Simon: Something like that.
> Magnus: I think it is very big. It is working together in different countries. But it is difficult to discuss, because there are not so many companies left when you are looking worldwide, because they are growing bigger and bigger.
> Magnus: I think there is something else - there must be something else

> Kasper: The Eurofighter… the European countries are building the aircraft together - British and French and German.
> Victor: I was thinking in the travel industry as well.
> Kasper: The really big industries get more…… (Dk, >30, grad)

> "The Airbus or the first satellite, the new European GPRS, with them we can finally torpedo the American GPS…" (A, >30, grad)

> "The Airbus or in general big items for space travel; they buy and produce also European products, but in different European countries and somewhere they are put together and sold as European products. " (A, <30, no grad)

In the product category of utilitarian products, respondents found it difficult to come up with products, which they would consider European. Interestingly, however, THE product which was mentioned predominantly across all focus groups was the Airbus. While this is a product that is beyond the reach of individual consumption, it is perceived as a European initiative with a joint outcome. As in the discussion of cars, a certain feeling of "Europeanness" emerges, which reflects a shared European rather than national identity.

<u>Utilitarian products as symbol for heterogenization in European consumer cultures</u>

For products which are mainly bought for their functional benefits, several product categories emerged, where consumers displayed a strong feeling towards national products rather than EU brands. Among the listed products are washing machines, skies but also (local) beverages. In general, there was only a very short discussion in all focus groups about utilitarian product categories that have a national focus. Perhaps consumers are not considering these product categories as important to mention or they simply are not aware of them, because they are bought out of needs compared to opportunity recognition. Reviewing the results, the focus on national products may be determined by the fact that consumers consider their national products as something that could be beneficial to customers from other EU-countries/cultures. So rather than opting for a non-national option, they persist on the national product to support its survival and subsequent diffusion within the EU. In line with the discussion on food, it appears that products which are "closer" to consumers' everyday purchases, national feelings dominate, whereas "Europeanness" is stressed in product categories, which are less frequently purchased. This is illustrated in the following quotes:

> Adela: Before I used to buy a lot of foreign products, because I thought they would be of better quality. But now it is the other way round and I buy Czech products on purpose, e.g. I buy Czech milk products. Germans buy their own products and protect their own market this way. (CZ, >30, grad)

Janez: I love European products. They show quality and strength.
Maja: bigger availability. European products are not sold everywhere. I would pay more if they are. (Slo, <30, grad)

Conclusion and Discussion

The free flow of goods and services within the European Union has reshaped consumer experiences in the marketplace. To explore how consumers balance these marketplace realities in their consumption behaviour was subject of our contribution. We pursued three main objectives. First, we wanted to explore tendencies in homogenization or heterogenization in European consumer culture. As the results show, it depends on the product category, whether European consumers tend to share similar views on EU products. Consumer durables with high symbolic value represent a product category to express "Europeanness" in consumption behaviour across focus groups. In contrast, with convenience goods, which are closer to the consumer, they tend to favour national alternatives. This supports our contentions and second research focus that ethnic identity plays a role in EU consumer culture. Consumers appear to balance their different identities through respective consumption (the EU-ID through consumer durables; the ethnic/national through convenience goods). This basically cuts across products with predominantly symbolic or utilitarian value. Relating that to our third research objective to take a closer look at how consumers acculturate to cultural change, findings point to the following facts: in terms of adopting new consumer behaviour patterns the predominant acculturation strategy is choosing some aspects of the new cultures and keep old habits. Interestingly, this cuts across all focus groups and does not vary substantially by to age or educational differences.

In terms of managerial implications, it seems that consumers are willing to accept EU products, however, with varying degree depending on the product category. Consumers support their positive feelings for the EU through consumption, stressing the qualities of EU workmanship. As this works across age, education and nationality, the customer-driven (rather than supply side driven, see for example Paliwoda (2007)) potential for pan-European marketing strategies appears to be there. At the same time, there is room for companies that stress/pertain to local in certain product categories.

As far as theoretical implications are concerned, focus group discussions on consumer cultures were helpful tools to more systematically grab changes in consumer behaviour within the EU. Moreover, while managing cultural influences from many different cultures seems to be more complex than in bi-polar acculturation, consumers seem manage well and do not

appear to be overwhelmed by the multitude of influences and brand choices. One reason may be the rich heritage and exposure to a multi-faceted market place within Europe.

We believe that our contribution offers interesting first insights into homogenization and heterogenization tendencies in EU consumer cultures; however, we have to add some caveats and avenues for future research. While we did find evidence that ethnic identity and EU-identity are salient at different times in a consumption context, it has to be noted that this link needs to be explored further. Respondents elaborated in a very sophisticated way on their national vs. their EU identity, they clearly perceive both of them and expressed ways how to balance them in their lives, the link to consumption, however, was difficult to establish with them in the focus groups. A different way of investigation may potentially remedy this issue. Moreover, our findings are based on self-reported consumption behaviour. Given the abundant availability of international products in supermarket shelves, the strong feeling for national products needs to be questioned. At least, it appears to be called for to investigate to what extent consumer perception and consumption realities match. Finally, our contribution was a first step to shed light on EU consumer cultures. To substantiate findings and extend their explanatory power, more process-oriented, longitudinal research in other country settings is necessary.

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Figure 1: Structure of stories: symbolic products
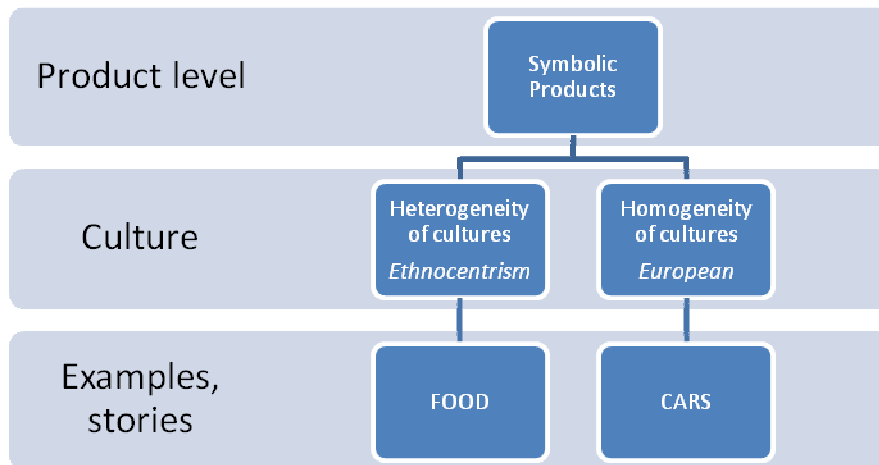
Figure 2: Structure of stories: utilitarian products